

Diversity Innovation Grant

Final Report

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In February 2022, the Johns Hopkins M.A. in Science Writing Program was awarded a Diversity Innovation Grant by the JHU Office of Diversity and Inclusion to host a webinar on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the science communication field and to gather qualitative feedback of the event through a questionnaire for attendees. This brief report summarizes outcomes of the webinar.

Background & Planning

The impetus for our grant proposal was a recognition that the field of science communication has a long-standing diversity problem. As *New York Times* science reporter Apoorva Mandavilli [once put it](#), “Without diversity in newsrooms, what you get is a small group of (mostly privileged) people writing for another small group of (mostly privileged) people.” We proposed a webinar/panel talk featuring prominent science and health journalists who would examine the barriers to entering the field of science communication, how those barriers can be removed, and why it is so important to remove them. We also envisioned the conversation covering the need to include diverse voices among interview sources, how to identify scientific topics that matter to diverse communities, and how to approach Indigenous and other marginalized communities with respect and sensitivity as a reporter.

We titled the event “Expanding our Universe: DEI and Science Communication” and scheduled the webinar for April 27, 2022, from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. We recruited four distinguished science journalists as speakers: Moderator - Ashley Smart, Associate Director of the MIT Knight Science Journalism Program; panelists - Debra Krol (*The Arizona Republic*), Rodrigo Pérez Ortega (*Science*), and Justin Worland (*TIME*).

To promote the event, we emailed invitations to all Science Writing students, alumni, and faculty. The event was also announced on the JHU Advanced Academic Programs website and Events Newsletter, and various other outlets including the e-letter of The Open Notebook, a non-profit organization that provides resources and training for science journalists.

Outcomes

On April 27, 2022, the Johns Hopkins M.A. in Science Writing Program hosted the webinar “Expanding our Universe: DEI and Science Communication,” which featured the above-mentioned journalists discussing challenges and solutions to making newsrooms more diverse and increasing diversity in science coverage. Ninety-two people attended the webinar in real time. A [recording](#) of the webinar, posted on the JHU Advanced Academic Programs’ YouTube channel, has been viewed 90 times as of May 31.

A link to the questionnaire was provided in the chat box during the session and also emailed to attendees the next day in a thank-you-for-attending letter. Available at [this link](#), the questionnaire included three open-ended questions (e.g., Please use the space below to note one or two new facts or ideas you took away from the panel talk. Was a particular statement, point, or question especially memorable?) Nine attendees completed the questionnaire. Sample responses appear below.

Lessons Learned – DEI and Science Communication

The hour-long webinar covered a broad range of issues within the sphere of DEI and science communication. We’ll highlight below a few memorable insights and recurring themes:

“Make a better effort to get to know these communities.” (Rodrigo Pérez Ortega)

Pérez Ortega set the stage for the conversation by explaining why diversity in science journalism should matter to the public. Although the science workforce is still dominated by white men, “there are many people in science from all ages, countries, ethnicities, and many identities...There’s a lot of diversity in perspectives and we need to foster that in our reporting...We need to make a better effort to get to know these communities.”

In addition, said Perez Ortega, the science journalism community should demonstrate diversity. “We need a diverse workforce in science writing to be able to write with authority on these topics.”

“They’re writing about us, but they’re not part of us.” (Debra Krol)

Debra Krol, who reports on environmental and Indigenous issues, says her Indigenous community members have told her that biologists, anthropologists, archeologists, and other scientists who have conducted research in their communities, as well as journalists who have reported on that research, have often ignored the perspectives of Indigenous residents.

She said she often hears questions and statements such as these: “Why didn’t they come and ask me?” and “They’re writing about us, but they’re not part of us.”

Furthermore, Krol stressed that there are Native people who possess both classical science training along and traditional knowledge who could serve as excellent expert sources for science stories. In fact, she stated, incorporating both perspectives can enrich science reporting.

Justin Worland later echoed Krol's remarks, encouraging reporters to "do the work to find the person in the community who can speak to the issue."

These insights appeared to have an impact with our audience. In highlighting salient lessons, one respondent to the questionnaire wrote:

Two ideas that stood out to me, were: 1) when reporting on a story or a scientific contribution, writers should seek, to the best of their ability, the perspectives of those directly involved in the story, and 2) there should be multiple paths to achieving credibility that acknowledge the vast ways that people can and do acquire knowledge.

"Find the equity lens on any story." (Justin Worland)

On the surface, a science story might seem to have nothing to do with diversity or equity, Worland acknowledged. But often, or perhaps even always, the story will offer a DEI angle. Worland encouraged writers to "find the equity lens on any story" and suggested strategies that could help. Toward that end, he encouraged newsrooms to hire more journalist of color and urged reporters to pause to ask questions that might reveal DEI angles. For example, How does this issue affect marginalized communities?

This advice resonated with one audience member, whose questionnaire highlighted this takeaway from the webinar:

As we are hiring, it was extremely helpful to think about how to reach a wider audience and why that is a moral imperative, as well as a path to a more accurate perspective

Sensitivity readers

The subject of sensitivity readers came up several times in the discussion and follow-up questionnaire. A sensitivity reader is someone a publication hires to review a piece of writing and help assure it accurately and sensitively represents marginalized groups. Several questionnaire respondents remarked that they were happy to learn about, or to learn more about, this new role in journalism and publishing.

Lessons Learned – The JHU Science Writing Program and DEI

We are pleased with the turnout to the webinar. Seventy-four people attended in real time; an additional 84 watched at least a portion of the recording – sizable numbers for our program. A Science Writing program event typically attracts ~50 attendees. The event may also have

reached a critical audience, namely professional and aspiring science writers and editors, a group with the ability to address DEI and sci comm issues firsthand.

In addition, we hope that the webinar demonstrates the Science Writing program's active interest in DEI and commitment to making our field more diverse.

Planning the webinar and assessing its impact have also made us reflect on DEI within our own program. For several years and long before we conceived the idea for a webinar, we knew our program had its own diversity problem, namely a lack of diversity among our faculty. Although the program has sought to recruit faculty from underrepresented minorities, we have not had great success. This project has underscored that we must redouble those efforts and seek new, creative ways to identify and attract faculty from a broad spectrum (e.g., forging collaborations with HBCUs).

We are also mindful of the ongoing need to represent diverse voices in the program's curriculum and extracurricular activities. Questionnaire respondents proposed several ideas for how the program could contribute toward those ends. Sample comments:

- Continue to highlight as many diverse voices and perspectives as possible. I think this could extend to reporting styles, which may vary across cultures.
- DEI should be built into every course, in lessons, readings, assignments, and guest speakers.
- One idea would be a speaker series highlighting the experiences of science journalists from traditionally underrepresented groups.
- An in depth talk about the Native American relationship to nature. It might be instructive to have a panel of a few different tribes to compare and contrast, since "Native American" is an umbrella term that includes so many nations.

The Hopkins Science Writing program has for the past several years been making progress on the first two of the above suggestions. Course curricula are now reviewed with DEI considerations in mind and faculty are encouraged to represent diverse voices in their reading lists. But our work has only started, and there is still much more to be done to make our program more diverse, inclusive, and equitable. We look forward to building on the success of the recent webinar.